



USAID's Office of U. S. Foreign Disaster Assistance

Food Security in the Sahel

May 29, 2001

Are the countries of the Sahel experiencing a famine?

No, the situation in the Sahel is not severe enough to be termed a famine at this time. However, several Sahelian countries are experiencing the effects of a serious food production shortfall. According to USAID's Famine Early Warning System (FEWS), a famine is "an extreme collapse in local availability and access to food that causes a widespread rise in mortality from outright starvation or hunger related illnesses". The 2000 grain production of the nine member nations of the Sahelian Committee for the Fight against Drought (CILSS) is estimated at 8.9 million MT. This is 21% lower than last year's production and 8% lower than the average production of the last five years.

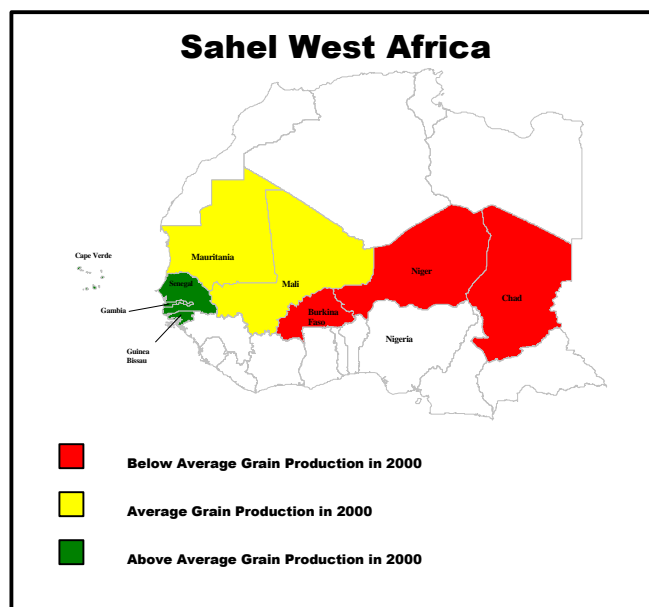


Figure 1.

What countries are affected?

In 2000, the grain production in Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger was below the average of the last five years. It was near average in Mali and Mauritania, and it was higher than average in Cape Verde, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Senegal. Chad and Niger are currently experiencing the worst cases of food insecurity in Sahelian West Africa. Nigeria, although not a member of CILSS, is also facing a worsening food situation. Since the first harvests of the current growing season won't occur until August or September, these countries are likely to continue to suffer from food shortages until harvest time. (See Figure 2)

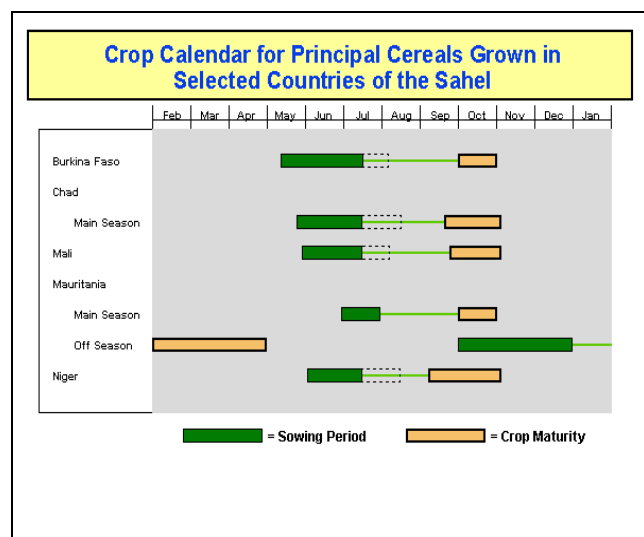


Figure 2. Source: Food and Agriculture Organization

Is this food production shortfall caused by drought?

According to the National Weather Service (NWS), a drought is "a period of abnormally dry weather, which persists long enough to produce a serious hydrologic imbalance". According to FEWS, the reduced food production in the Sahel is a result of "unfavorable agro-climatic conditions at the end of the growing season". The overall rainfall in 2000 was not a dramatic departure from average levels; therefore, not technically a drought. However, a short dry spell at the end of the growing season had a serious effect on overall grain production levels. (See Figure 3)

How does regional food security affect individual countries and vice-versa?

In the Sahel, grains are regularly traded between neighboring countries. Depending on the time of year and the length of growing seasons, a country may be both an importer and an exporter of grains. Niger, for example, is traditionally a food deficient country. Even during normal growing conditions, Niger must rely on imported grains from Burkina Faso, Mali, and Nigeria to meet the needs of its population. However, as these nations are experiencing food security issues of their own, the level of exports from these nations has been reduced this year. Nigeria, with its 110 million inhabitants, is traditionally both an importer and exporter of grains depending on the season. However, high fuel prices coupled with a production shortfall in the northern part of the country have dramatically reduced the level of exports to neighboring countries.

What other factors could affect a country's food security situation?

Political turmoil, cross-border conflicts, natural disasters, and complex emergencies can cause a destruction or shift of resources, including food stocks. In complex emergencies, food shortages often result from the destruction of crops and arable land, the displacement of large populations, and the inaccessibility of food stocks. Since the end of 2000, market prices for millet in northern Chad have increased dramatically. Although millet production was below average, another factor has been the heavy presence of military personnel providing security for the upcoming presidential elections in Chad. This has reduced the availability of millet on the market, increasing the price.

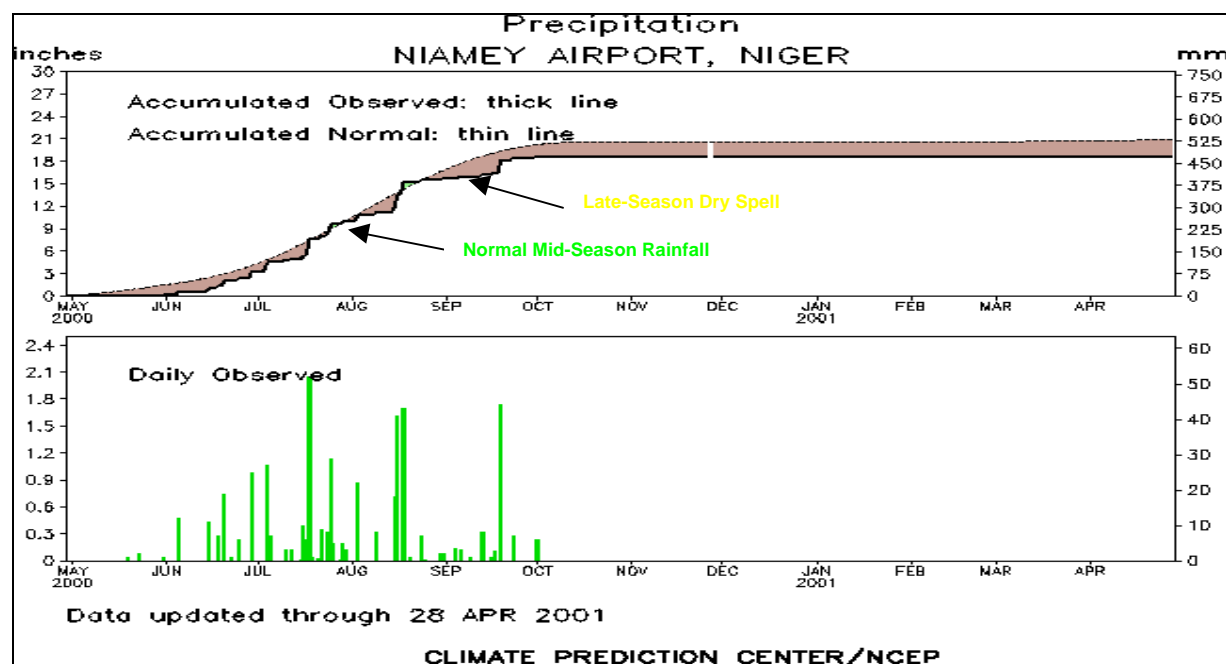


Figure 3. Source: National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

How has the food security situation affected the local populations?

The nations of the Sahel are among the poorest economically in the world. The majority of these populations practice subsistence farming or pastoralism, and do not have the capacities to rely solely on market grains if their harvest is poor. In Niger, the lower 2000 production has resulted in a government-estimated shortfall of 160,000 MT of grains. People in the most food insecure areas have been forced to implement coping mechanisms such as creating art objects for sale to supplement their income, sending the young men to find work in neighboring countries, and changing their diet.

How does food security affect food prices?

Although the current high market prices for grain in the Sahel can be attributed to the generally poor production in 2000, production speculation and hoarding can also play a part in the increased prices. With the recent improvements in agricultural technology and information systems in Africa, the ability to forecast crop production levels has also improved. Now, official and unofficial production estimates are disseminated to even rural communities.

Even before the final production numbers are determined, some grain brokers will price speculate and hoard their stocks until prices reach a certain level. Although the Government of Niger believes that hoarded millet stocks do not exceed 15,000 MT, a fraction of the total shortfall, they have threatened to take action against grain brokers who refuse to put their grains on the market.

What is being done nationally and internationally to respond to this situation?

The Government of Niger has attempted to mitigate the situation by subsidizing local millet sales, setting the market price for rice, and issuing stern warnings to hoarders. The U.N. World Food Program (WFP) has implemented an Emergency Operation Program for Chad and is currently considering one for Niger. The National Food Security Fund and the Donor Common Fund have also made available funds in support of subsidized grain. Several donor nations have also offered bilateral assistance.

What is USAID doing to respond to this situation?

USAID/OFDA recently sent its Regional Advisor for West Africa to assess the situation in Niger. The Regional Advisor and the U.S. Embassy in Niger agree that the situation is not currently a famine, but is deteriorating. USAID/OFDA has responded to the disaster declaration in Chad by providing funding for nutritional feeding centers and providing rice seed to vulnerable families. USAID/OFDA is also coordinating with other USAID offices including Food for Peace (FFP) and FEWS to prepare a second, more comprehensive, regional assessment. USAID/FFP has ongoing Title II development programs in Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger, aimed at improving food security. Many of the USAID/FFP commodities are being used in support of food for work projects. USAID will continue to closely monitor the situation.